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The Management Science as a Practical Field

In Support of Action Research

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Abstract: The paper considers the implications of treating management as academic field, its consequent losing direct link to the practice in spite of the dire need for knowing-how orientation in business education, and the potential of action learning to fill this gap. Management since its inception has been, as all young disciplines, related to practice, originally being even perceived as an engineering subdivision (Boje and Winsor, 1993; Shenhav, 1999). Recently, there has been a growing concern that bringing new ideas to business world and solving its real life problems is a promise Academia makes, but cannot fulfill (Czarniawska, 1994). Also, relations between academics and practitioners, although exist, are loose (Barley, Meyer and Gash, 1988). On the other hand, it should be noted that traditional Academia has been cultivating the impractical science tradition for years, equaling practice and 'knowing-how' with unscientific approach (Schön, 1984; Greenwood and Lewin, 2001). In spite of this, there is an ongoing demand for management education and the universities are being trusted with providing its alumni with conceptual tools to deal with the complex word of real business. However, the standards for this education are under serious scrutiny now (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Policano, 2005). The relation between practice and management teaching is questioned, and the typical "practice-oriented" teaching methods are doubted (Watson, 2001 Czarniawska, 2003). Therefore in this paper the usefulness of action learning and participative action research, as alternatives to the traditional model in management education are discussed. Action learning is presented as a method strictly related to practice (emerging from it by definition), but also forming a strong methodological alternative to the old-school academic teaching and researching model (Levin and Greenwood, 2001; Coghlan, 2003; Coghlan and Brannick, 2003; Huxham and Vangen, 2003)

Keywords: Action Learning, Action Research, Management Education, Business Teaching Methods, Knowing-How

Introduction

THIS PAPER CONSIDERS the pros and cons of perceiving management science on one hand as practical, and on the other as theoretical field. It tries to address the forever war between the theory and the practice in the academic world. It aims at discussing the methodological problems raised by scholars who analyze and advise companies, as well as at proposing the alternative approach (action research) which allows a serious dialogue between the practitioners and the theorists of organizations.

I start by examining the tension between the practice and the theory present in academic discourse, and try to present the disregard the Academia shows towards practitioners, as well as the reciprocation of this feeling by professionals. I discuss the reasons for this dichotomy and analyze the historical practice-oriented origins of the management science. I refer to the interesting paradox of management scholars perceiving practicality as positive (contrarily to the most of representatives of other academic disciplines). I also point to the methodological questions, arising even from honest attempts by management scholars to be

“practical”. I present the discussion on the current crisis in business education. I look into the archaic course curriculum, as well as into the disrespect from the educators for the demands the business world is expressing. I mention the incompatibility of courses with the real-life situations, which management alumni have to deal with. I conclude with bringing up action research and action learning approaches as useful alternatives for business education. I describe methodological excellence of action research in combining both the scholarly rigor and the actual orientation on organizational practices.

Repulsion towards Practice from Academia

The relations between academics and practitioners of business, although existing, are rather loose (Barley, Meyer and Gash, 1988). Managers do not routinely turn to scholars for help in developing their strategies, structures, or policies (Porter and McGibbon, 1988; Abrahamson, 1996). Neither does Academia, in general, recognize practical experience as equally worthy to theoretical training in teaching and research. At best, people who make the transition from practice to university, may count on starting



all over from a junior position on a tenure track (Mabry, May and Berger, 2004). Even rigorous practitioner's research is often denounced scholarly status.

Some perceive this tension in terms of "paradigm wars" (Anderson and Herr, 1999). Fundamental disagreement of beliefs and basic assumptions, dissimilar methods of validation of fact, different research apparatus, varying metaphors used to describe the reality, as well as diverse analysis methods separate both of these worlds (Shrivastava and Mitroff, 1984). Certainly, to some extent the clash may be explained also by the power struggle: scholars ground their authority in ability to persuade the society that their claims are superior to the others, that the science they create is the ultimate way of reaching the truth about the world (Feyerabend, 1996). Thus, the scientists "know", and the others (namely, the practitioners) only "believe" (Latour, 1987). This division then is an artificial result of the social competition for being recognized, as all people have intellectual capabilities, but not all are trained in using the vocabulary established by those called "scholars" (Gramsci, 1971).

However, the described conflict is probably also due to the fact that the traditional academe perceives "knowing how" (knowledge embedded in action) as inferior to "knowing that" (knowledge codified and structured for reflection). As Donald Schön (1984) convincingly shows, although *knowing that* results from *knowing how*, universities concentrate on the first, or even try to reverse the sequence of implication. The creation of unusual, artificial and general theory is valued higher in academic circles than achieving excellent understanding of some particular organization, or solving an urgent, albeit local, problem (Bolton and Stolcis, 2003). The standard mode of teaching classes (lectures) also favors book wisdom and it calls for lots of effort from the side of the lecturer to try any other possibilities. Additionally, as the procedures for scientific inquiry have been to wide extent formalized, and as the authority recognition and career path in the academia have been very structured, in the end many scholars equal practice and 'knowing-how' with unscientific approach (Greenwood and Lewin, 2001). The departmental divisions, advancing specialization of journals, as well as professional requirements at tenure track, make scholars concentrate on the mainstream, safe rather than innovative research quite early in their career. Interdisciplinary orientation is discouraged. Even in cases where academics from different backgrounds try to form a joint team on some common issue, often there is no common language to share the findings, so detached from the reality academic knowledge may be (Czarniawska, 2003b).

Although there is a move in many universities to commercialize intellectual property and come up to the industry's expectations (Etzkowitz et al, 2000), the tendency towards practice is not clear. There are also serious ethical concerns about this specific form of coming to terms with practitioners (Murphy and Saal, 1990). It is not a coincidence that universities are called "ivory towers", and the phrases such as "they won't teach you that in school", or "that's theory" clearly show the resentment from the practitioners towards the way the schools treat them and their knowledge.

Practical Origins of MS

In management science the situation seems a bit different than in other academic fields. Here scholars quite often proudly announce their practical orientation. Contrarily to the core university disciplines, where being characterized as "practitioner" is a disparaging label, in business it is just the opposite. Many business teachers are proud of their consulting assignments, or of regular corporate appointments they hold. Being called "just a theorist" may be an insult similar to being called practice-oriented in the traditional Academia.

This is probably the result of our history. Since its inception, our field has been, as many new disciplines, related to practice. In fact, it was even originally perceived as an engineering subdivision (Boje and Winsor, 1993; Shenhav, 1999). The organizations were "engineered", the clue of scientific management lied in mechanistic design of workplaces and tasks. It is also worth mentioning that the very first stars of management science were all successful consultants: Frederick Taylor, Frank Gilbreth, Henri Fayol, to mention just a few, made their living rather by giving advice than by academic teaching (Nadworny, 1957). They were hired to solve particular organizational problems, and they built their authority on the satisfaction of the companies they worked for. The whole discipline was created on the promise that it will bring working solutions to the issues the companies faced at that time.

The management scholars were "company doctors", providing hands-on advice for a fee: e.g. Tavistock Institute was asked by the British government to consult many companies after the Second World War (Czarniawska, 1999), since the very beginning business schools opened corporate-funded chairs, etc.

It should not be surprising: Management, as many applied fields, emerged from the promise to solve problems recognized by the society. It is quite characteristic for many other young social sciences. Barbara Czarniawska (1994, 1999) gives the examples of philosophy (promising Athenian

politicians to bring advice on subjects varying from military strategy to pedagogy), sociology (in Durkheim's claims able to help, among others, in eliminating poverty and crime), and economics (allowing predictable economic development). While these three have almost completely lost link with their initial claims, management still to wide extent does try to stand up to its original promises. Many scholars from the field do believe that management theory has a lot to offer to the practice, and that in fact it is an applied discipline (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Kelemen and Bransal, 2002).

Management as Impractical Science

Unfortunately, the practice-oriented side of management literature long time ago developed into a sort of pulp fiction (Styhre and Sundgren, 2004). The "search for excellence" in academic insight has changed into the pursuit of readers. Lots of the managerial literature bases on rhetoric persuading the reader that the application of some new fashionable management technique or system is not only necessary to improve the company's well-being, but is in fact crucial for its survival (Abrahamson, 1996). Every year over 2000 books with "good advice" on doing business are published, and there is a huge market for management gurus, proposing concepts, ideas, as well as dubious counsel at exorbitant price (Towill, 1999). Although management fads change quickly, they usually have one thing in common: they vouch results, quite often irrespective of the cultural context (Rosenzweig, 1994; Kostera, 1995). Although effectiveness of universal organizational advice is often be uncertain, this fact still does not decrease the demand for it: consultants can always find an excuse for the failure of the recipe they proposed. Many of the experts prove plainly wrong or even fake the data, but it does not affect their popularity, as Tom Peters' case clearly shows (Towill, 1999; Byrne, 2001). This should not be surprising: we may safely assume that it is probably easier for them than e.g. for medical doctors. However, many medical treatments commonly prescribed in the old times were, according to contemporary knowledge, harmful for the patient. They were not, though, causing harm to the doctor's authority (Blackler, 1993), and so is in the case of management pundits.

This pop management stream sometimes may even lead to the general conclusion that solving any real life problems is a promise Academia makes, but cannot fulfill (Czarniawska, 1994). This is a serious and justified challenge to business studies. McCloskey's question "if you're so smart, why aren't you rich" (1992), originally addressed to economists, still holds in validity for management scholars and

should not be discarded lightly. After all, if we, as scholars, are so knowledgeable about doing business, and we follow economic rationality, it is not entirely clear why we tend to hold to a lower paid academic job, and so few of us decide to lead a corporation or a start-up ourselves.

There are also serious methodological concerns about our abilities to consult the business world. Indeed, there is a certain dose of prance to claim that a researcher can give useful advice to people who actually live any organizational reality. As anthropologists learned decades ago, giving authoritative recommendations to the members of different cultures rarely works out (Geertz, 1973). Informing the managers how they should manage makes as much sense as expecting them to teach scholars how to categorize ideas or analyze literature (Kostera, 2003). There are no company doctors, as there are virtually no universal corporate diseases and, fore mostly, treatments. Organizational realities are not only contingent, but also highly impenetrable for outsiders: at best, a researcher can carefully try to understand shards of what the organizational actors agree to share about their world, rather than try to fit whatever s/he observes into some prior theoretical universal model (Latour, 1986).

Unsurprisingly, the other stream of academic literature on management, which has strong scholar grounds, to the vast extent drifts away from the problems of the practitioners. As early as in 1978 Gerald I. Susman and Roger D. Evered wrote:

There is a crisis in the field of organizational science. The principal symptom of this crisis is that as our research methods and techniques have become more sophisticated, they have also become increasingly less useful for solving the practical problems that members of organizations face.

Since then the split has only widened. Thus, management science is effectively divided now: one branch focuses on consulting and providing relatively simple advice to business, the other concentrates on high-quality scholarly analysis, accessible only for other scholars. Undoubtedly both can continue as they are, and both are needed. Also, for management science to develop as a purely scholarly discipline, the practical scope is not necessary, and can even be damaging in the long term, at least if the objective for our field is to be treated as equal to other academic subjects. However, all the described doubts cannot lead to the conclusion that management science should lose its links with the practice. Many corporations and managers do express their interest in scholarly analysis of organizations and, in some cases, ask for our help. They also demand MBA graduates to be more practically prepared for their

work. The requirements of the students, who expect a bit more than a couple of semesters of general education, must also be taken into account. Thus, there is a need for approaches allowing a focus on actual organizational reality, but escaping the methodological predicaments present in the mainstream research and consulting. If we are to try to fulfill the promise our field is making, a new philosophy of treating practice in scholarly work is necessary. We need a method allowing a constructive dialogue based on a combination of the academic and practical approaches.

Crisis of Management Education

One of the areas where practitioners meet with scholars could be university teaching. The demand for management education is ongoing and, in spite of the research crisis, the universities are being trusted with providing their alumni with conceptual tools to deal with the complex world of real business.

Unfortunately, with the sole exception to college ads, the relation between practice and management teaching is as loose as with research (Watson, 2001; Czarniawska, 2003a). Universities are increasing their market orientation, which results in treating knowledge as a common commodity and providing a factory-like production of education (Czarniawska and Genell, 2002), but not necessarily in a more practical approach.

It should be noted, though, that the standards for business education are under serious scrutiny now (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Policano, 2005). The traditional MBA program, relying heavily on quantitative methods, is on decline. There are many reasons for that, and the demise of the strategic planning dream is certainly among the major ones. The belief in predictability of the business world and in the possibility of building useful algorithmic scenarios was proven too far-stretched, though business schools were the last to admit it in their curricula (Ackoff, 1979; Mintzberg, 1994; Grossman, 2001).

Also, some schools do stress their emphasis on real-life cases analysis in their teaching. Harvard case-study method, a technique with highly mythologized origins (Schlossman et al, 1994) is but a one example. In a simulated environment, basing on the data provided by the instructor, the students are supposed to find solutions to the problems described, and thus prepare for the ones the reality may bring in the future. Solving cases is a substitute to real business situations and, certainly, this step towards making the learning experience more practical is worth appreciation. However, this exercise is quite far from what the business alumni really face. Most case-studies are idealized stories,

with standard dramaturgy (beginning – action development – denouement), and require data analysis rather than interaction. Obviously, they are often in sheer opposition to real life problems, which are characterized by fuzziness, and to a much wider extent call for political and rhetorical skills, rather than document examination. Even that is a good start, though.

Unfortunately, most schools do not go any further and refrain from incorporating practice into their curriculum by more intensive practitioners participation in course delivery, or from introducing participatory methods of teaching instead of lectures. All this turmoil may be somehow related to the general crisis on what management science is and where it should, as a discipline, go (Jeffrey, 1993; Van Maanen, 1995; Fabian, 2000; Weiss, 2000). Still, the dire need for practice in business education has to be addressed in spite of any philosophical discussions our discipline may undergo.

Action Research as a Common Ground

One of the possibilities for an approach that would avoid the pitfalls of popular management, as well as refute the major methodological concerns about our ability to consult, and also introduce practice to business education, is action research. Although it has been present in the academic discourse for quite a while already, it still awaits wider recognition in the management science and business programs (with some noble exceptions, such as Aston Business School, Auckland Business School, Cornell University, Norwegian Action Research "Enterprise 2000" Program, and several others). This may be due to the fact that action research often is associated with social change movements and democratization processes, not typically identified with corporations. The problems of business field described above, as well as increasing appreciation of ideas such as "participatory management" or "empowerment" in literature (Slater and Bennis, 1990; Collins, 1997) and in business show though that further incorporation of action research and action learning into management education may be useful.

As there are many views on action research, it is quite natural that it is also often misunderstood. Many perceive it as another qualitative method, but this does not do justice to the approach. Although action research does use qualitative tools extensively, it is beyond the qualitative-quantitative divide and does include quantitative studies, whenever the researcher or the field consider them useful (Reason, 1988; Levin and Greenwood, 2001). Neither is action research a "methodology", as it uses many of them, depending on the subject, the researcher and the situation. Action research is more a philosophy of

doing academic work, a view on the scholar's role in the society, and the epistemological stance. As such, it can be adapted by many students of organizations, should they appreciate its strong points. These will be addressed in short below.

Action research is a method that is strictly related to praxis (emerging from it by definition), but also forming a serious methodological alternative to the old-school academic teaching and researching model (Levin and Greenwood, 2001; Coghlan, 2003; Brydon-Miller et al, 2003; Coghlan and Brannick, 2003; Huxham and Vangen, 2003). In the words of Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001: 1) it is

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human process, grounded in a participatory worldview (...). It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people

Also, *Action Research International* journal on its homepage specifies that it:

consists of a family of methodologies which pursue outcomes of both action (change) and research (understanding). It uses a process which alternates between action and systematic reflection, or achieves theory-practice integration by some other means.

In action research the knowledge is understood as local, intersubjectively generated, and even emotional. This approach relies on the assumption that any change in the organizational system is achievable only if the key actors engage in the process.

As a result, action research escapes the previously described traps of current academia. First of all, it is totally oriented at practice. In the often quoted excerpt Kurt Levin, one of the forefathers of action research, writes that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (1951: 169). The theories created in action research are emerging from the field, they are rooted in the practical perceptions of the organizational reality from its key inhabitants. Similarly to the methodology of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1957), action research allows generation of local interpretations, precisely describing the particular setting, and not involving abstract models, often incompatible to the field. By relying on the confessions of the studied community members, action research enables a unique insight into what kinds of problems and tasks are typical in any given organization.

Additionally, action research (Argyris and Schön, 1991: 86)

builds descriptions and theories within the practice itself, and tests them through *intervention experiments* – that is, through experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desirable change in the situation

This sort of practical emphasis and access to the real field may revive both the academic study of management, as well as enrich the methods of teaching business. It certainly is an additional advantage to incorporating action research into our everyday scholarly practice. This method helps a scholar to deal with the danger of becoming isolated in an ivory-tower, and solves the paradox of giving advice to the ones who know their own work much better. In fact, action research does admit the underprivileged role of the researcher in the analysis of organization. His or her role is not to tell the studied community what they should do, nor to bring standard ready-to-use solutions. It relies on understanding and appreciation of the analyzed group of people. The researcher (just like an anthropologist) tries to reach the deepest layers of the culture, immerse in the perceptions generated by the participants. In this sense action research is performative, not ostensive (Latour, 1986), as it assumes the networks of meanings created by organizational actors to be the clue of what actual workplace practice is (Geertz, 1973).

However, contrarily to the classical organizational anthropology approach (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992), action research not only does not discourage the scholar from engaging into the problems signalized by the studied community, but it actually recognizes this common need to get committed. In this sense, it can be clinical, and not only ethnographical (Schein, 1985), as the objective of the action research is not just to describe the reality, but also facilitate its change. Still, the change is not planned solely by the scholar. In opposition to classical consulting, action researcher does not suggest solutions, but helps to assist to the progress of their discovery by the people who actually need them. The good grasp of theory by the scholar matters only to the extent to which the participants find theories useful and expanding their understanding of the problem. The researcher plays a subservient role to the group, uses his/her knowledge merely to make the solution discovery process easier. It is also worth mentioning that this way the proposed plans of actions have a much higher chance of being really implemented. This is because most organizations suffer from the lack of commitment rather than lack of ideas, and commitment to any change comes from the

engagement in its planning (Sevón, 1993; Abrahamson, 2004). Thus, action research provides scholarly background and validity for participative consulting in business and helps to avoid some of the dilemmas arising from being both a constructionist, and a consultant (Czarniawska, 2001b). It also helps in making organizational change more likely to happen.

The final important reason for closer look at action research is its democratic focus. As action researchers value the knowledge of all the participants equally, they denounce their own privileged role. Such an approach is extremely useful in academic teaching. Contrarily to pedagogy (teaching children) in andragogy (teaching adults) an important part of a learning experience is knowledge sharing (Knowles, 1970; Davenport, 1985). Most of the business students have a lot to contribute to the class, and they can make the tuition process much richer. However, the standard approach to teaching management often involves a one way communication. As Paulo Freire convincingly shown (1970/1993), the relation between the teacher and the student is fundamentally narrative, and thus it relies on a dialogue. As a result, it is worth the more, the more the conversation is symmetric, and not based on modern relation of asymmetrical power (Bauman, 1987/98). Thus, action research and action learning has the potential to democratize business schools and introduce real-life experience sharing. Clearly, apart from inviting the students to more active participation, engaging them more in the teaching and interesting them in the subject, this approach can also help the teachers advance in their own knowledge as well.

Implementing action research into Academia would require more a change of minds than a change of structures: As such, it is nevertheless extremely difficult. However, some initial moves should be relatively simple and acceptable to many regular teachers, if only they overcame the obvious inertia. For example, teaching what action research really is in regular business schools modules would be relatively easy, provided that there are scholars willing to prepare such courses. Also, introducing collaborative grading to some or most classes would require the shift in mentality of the teachers. Agreeing to granting the students some freedom in assigning grades to themselves would not be a

perfunctory decision, but would give the teachers additional time, which is often quite important for them. Offering discussion forums instead of lectures would be also relatively facile: many tutors already do that, although it is not always reflected in the courses formal structure. Further steps, such as fully experiential education and learning by doing at universities (Dewey, 1938), as well as curricula designed by the students, may be more difficult and effortful. Still, as many authors show, such a change in our roles should be after all beneficial and liberating for both the “professors”, and the “pupils” (Lempert et al, 1996; Fletcher, 2005).

Conclusions

Barbara Czarniawska (2001a) proposes to follow Donald Schön’s advice to be a “reflective practitioner” with the call for “observers dedicated to practice”. Indeed, the management science needs to re-conceptualize its relation with the practical world. While keeping the academic focus, it must open itself for the knowing-how the field offers, and listen more carefully to the organizational actors, instead of imposing theoretical (and often fancy) models on their actions. The abilities of Academia to direct the practitioners are limited, and certainly some modesty in this respect is necessary. However, whenever the practice asks for guidance, it is our responsibility as management scholars to try to stand up to the call.

As shown in this article, action research allows a methodologically grounded dialogue with the field. Moreover, it offers tools for generation of ideas and theories from and by the communities. The invented plans of actions created by means of this approach are more supported by the people involved. Additionally, the use of action research methods enables the lecturers to widen the learning experience by the practical knowledge the students have.

Certainly, not all organization scholars will be persuaded to action research (even if just for the extremely egalitarian approach, not privileging the scholar or the management). There will be probably also always some place for pop-management, as well as for strictly academic, non-pragmatic organization studies. However, on the important cross-roads our field is now, it may be worth to take a closer look at the approach, which allows to eliminate many predicaments our discipline is facing.

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